Arranging reality: The editing mechanisms of the world's first Yiddish newspaper, the Kurant (Amsterdam, 1686-1687)

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10. Conclusions

In the previous chapters I have tried to find an answer to the main research question: The Kurant, and, more specifically, its editor, ‘arranged reality’ by selecting and editing the material from the sources. What can the selecting and editing mechanisms of the Kurant tell us about the intentions of its makers and about the kind of imagined community of readers the Kurant may have helped create?

As we found in Chapter 6, the two men who were probably the initiators of the Kurant, Uri Faybesh Halevi and Moushe bar Avrom Ovinu, were both men with original ideas who were not afraid to take risks. Halevi’s contacts with Sephardim and Christians might have inspired him to publish the first Yiddish newspaper, following the Sephardic Gazeta de Amsterdam, and possibly enabling its readers to discuss the world news with Christian neighbors or to be as well-informed as their non-Jewish business relations, just as he published a Yiddish Bible translation because he wanted to give the Ashkenazi Jews the opportunity to discuss the Bible with Christians. The convert Moushe bar Avrom Ovinu, the compositor, translator and editor, was a skilled translator from Hebrew, German and Dutch to Yiddish. He could serve as an intermediary between the Jewish and the Christian world. Moushe’s later activities as a printer show that he took original initiatives, often combining Jewish and Christian elements. Although we do not know who came up with the idea of publishing a Yiddish newspaper, it might well be that Moushe himself had a hand in it.

The second printer, David de Castro Tartas, was – as far as we know – the only ‘newspaper man’ among the Jewish printers. As neither the Gazeta de Amsterdam nor the Gazzetta d’Amsterdam were Jewish in character, it is doubtful whether Tartas had specific ideas about the identity of the Kurant as a newspaper for the Ashkenazi community of readers. Yet being an experienced newspaper printer, he was the most obvious person to take over the publication of the Kurant in June 1687 in an attempt to make it a commercial success.

Whether the intended readers were ready for the ambitious plans of the makers of the Kurant is another question. In Chapter 4 I tried to determine whether the Dutch Ashkenazi Jews might have been interested in a Yiddish newspaper. I found that this interest does not become evident from other Yiddish publications in the Dutch Republic in the second half of
the seventeenth century: as far as is known the Kurant was the only Yiddish publication that did not have a Jewish subject and was not rooted in Jewish tradition. Yet as many Ashkenazi Jews were involved in trade, they met non-Jews as customers and business relations. In order to be at an equal level with their non-Jewish business relations, the Ashkenazi Jews may have felt the need to keep themselves informed of the latest news, and may have welcomed a Yiddish newspaper with international news reports borrowed from Dutch newspapers.

In Chapter 4 I estimated that among the three thousand Yiddish-speaking Jews living in Amsterdam around 1690 and among the four thousand in the entire Dutch Republic between three hundred and eight hundred might have been readers of the Kurant, which then might have had a circulation of between thirty and a hundred and sixty. If the Kurant was distributed outside of the Dutch Republic it might be somewhat more. Although this seems to be a rather low number for a successful commercial enterprise, even a small group of people can form an imagined community of readers.

By portraying ‘the editor at work’ I hoped to find out what was Moushe bar Avrom Ovinu’s way to ‘arrange reality’. That it was his way in the first place, rather than the way of the two printers, seems evident because no difference can be discerned between style and content and the use of sources in the issues printed by Halevi and Tartas.

The way the editor selected the sources and edited them shows that he took his job seriously and did his best to adapt the news to the needs of the intended readers. Especially in the periods when the Kurant was published once a week he took the news from almost every source available and was able to fit in the relevant news by skillfully ‘cutting and pasting’. Important editing tools of the Kurant are the simplification and explication of the events described in the Dutch newspapers, the simplification of the language and the syntax, and the adding of a nonpartisan perspective. In these respects the Kurant differs from the Gazeta de Amsterdam and the Gazzetta d’Amsterdam, which both seem to have used only one issue of a source a week, even when more issues were available, and translated Dutch reports in a more literal way.

The most striking editing tool is probably the focus of the Kurant on the main subjects, which is dramatically different from that of the Dutch sources. The editor presents his readers with a different view on what is going on in the world, concentrating on what he thinks are the main items: the armed conflicts between the European armies and the Turks,
especially the war in Hungary between the Habsburgs and the Turks. In 9.1 I argued that this news apparently was considered even more interesting for the Jewish readers than for the Dutch readers because many of the Jews or their parents had fled the Thirty Years’ War in Germany or Chmielnicki’s atrocities in Ukraine and Poland. So they must have been aware of the influence of wars on the lives of Jews. Besides, the few Ashkenazi businessmen, especially the Gomperts family, were involved in the provisioning of the Imperial troops in Hungary.

Compared to its sources, the Kurant carries less political and royal news. As I argued in 9.1, the reason for this may be that, given the fact that newspapers were not allowed to divulge every political decision, ‘political’ news often consisted of what we would call ‘royal news’, interesting for a Dutch readership, but probably less so for the Jewish readers of the Kurant, who may have been less inclined to identify with royal families in other countries, except perhaps with the King of Poland.

The focus of the editor of the Kurant on ‘important’ subjects like armed conflicts does not imply he ignored other subjects. In the limited space available he could borrow only a minority of the news on other subjects. Yet virtually all subjects mentioned in the Dutch sources are also mentioned in the Kurant. Especially the percentage of human interest stories in the Kurant is often comparable to that in the Dutch newspapers or even higher. The editor may have judged that sensational news about disasters or miracles was as fascinating to Jews as it was to everybody else.

The overall impression of the news coverage concerning Jews in the Kurant is that it follows the Dutch newspapers – which appear to be reliable, if detached, sources. In most cases – the fate of the Jews after the conquest of Buda, the Jew murderer in Hamburg – the Kurant did not intend to present a specifically Jewish outlook, and refrained from adding information from Jewish sources. The main reason for this may have been that the editor had to work fast and in most cases may have been unable to find Jewish sources, whereas Dutch newspapers were always at hand. Only once the Kurant – probably – brings news from a Jewish source and in a few cases it adds a ‘Jewish accent’ to a report. Besides, it writes freely about Christian subjects, not only about persecuted Huguenots, but also about miracles performed by Catholic saints. Maybe here we can discern the influence of the first printer, Uri Faybesh Halevi. Halevi apparently saw potential in the publication of a Yiddish newspaper. Just as he published a Yiddish Bible translation to give the Ashkenazi Jews the
possibility to study the literal text of the Bible for discussions with Christians, he may have given them the Kurant to be as well-informed about the world news – including human interest news – as their Christian neighbors and business relations.

Of Halevi’s Bible translation we know that it was a commercial failure. We have no evidence of the commercial success of the Kurant, yet the fact that the printer decided to publish it once instead of twice a week between December 6, 1686 and February 14, 1687 and that he turned over the publication to David de Castro Tartas are not encouraging signs.

David de Castro Tartas must have seen potential in the publication as well. After all, he was an experienced ‘newspaper man’, who had been publishing the Gazeta de Amsterdam for at least fifteen years when he decided to take over the Kurant. Yet already on August 8, 1687 he, too, decided to skip the publication of the Tuesday issue (for a period of three months), because – as he stated – it sold poorly. We do not know what happened after the last known issue of December 5, 1687, but even if Tartas continued publishing the Kurant, it was probably not for long.

The editor himself, Moushe bar Avrom Ovinu, invested all his talents and energy in the editing of the Kurant, as it seems, from the first known issue until the last known one. There can hardly be any doubt that he intended to ‘arrange reality’ in a way that would suit the needs and the taste of its readers. Yet the fact that he became a printer himself in 1688, starting his own printing house in 1690, and that there are no traces of a Jewish newspaper printed by Tartas, one of his colleagues, or by Moushe himself after the last known issue suggests that Moushe stopped editing the Kurant and continued his career which would yield new, remarkable and daring projects, such as a Hebrew translation of the New Testament and the first Yiddish geography book.

The question is whether the real Ashkenazi community in Amsterdam and perhaps outside of it could identify with an ‘imagined community’ of readers the Kurant might have helped create. The Kurant may have quenched the Ashkenazi Jews’ thirst for information from the outside world, tailored to their needs and interests. On the other hand, in view of the character of other Yiddish texts from the second half of the seventeenth century, readers may have found the Kurant too little ‘Jewish’ in character. Yet there is no evidence for either of these assumptions. In any case, despite the impressive efforts of its makers, the limited number of potential readers and the fact that the Kurant seems to have been short-
lived make it difficult to view the publication of the world’s first Yiddish newspaper as a success.